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Autism E-News

Volume 3, Issue 1
November 2005

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Making the Year Successful for Students with Asperger Syndrome in General Education Classes

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More students with Asperger Syndrome (AS) are participating in general education settings. This is because of an increase in prevalence and an emphasis for access in general education curricula/settings in federal regulations such as No Child Left Behind and IDEA 2004. These students may perplex teachers given, by definition, they tend to be on or above grade level but struggle in class due to significant academic problems, learning disabilities, and lack of social understanding (Klin & Volkmar, 2000). Because they might not understand the rules of basic

social interaction, these students are particularly tricky for teachers to teach. These students may also be literal thinkers, inflexible, disorganized, and poor problem solvers (Church, Alisanski, & Amanullah, 2000). To further complicate matters, teachers in general and special education are inadequately prepared to educate students with AS due to scarce professional development programs. (Smith Myles, 2005)

What follows are suggested strategies for supporting students with AS in general education settings.

1. Teach Visually. For example:

- Use advance organizers (e.g., written agendas, outlines, written main points to be discussed)
- Use graphic organizers (e.g., visual representations to identify facts, organize information, see how pieces of information are related, organize observations/research/opinions/reflections, problem solve, apply to real-life situations, semantic maps)
- Use outlines (e.g., complete outlines, skeletal outlines)
- Use short phrases and put main points in writing
- Use an overhead projector
- Provide written directions
- Use a visual timer

2. Use Instructional Adaptations and Modifications. For example:

- Use short sentences
- Give a rationale as to why the information is worth learning
- Explain the goals, break down information and present in small increments
Model whenever possible
- Actively engage and provide with physical cues to attend to relevant stimuli
- State expected behavior and provides examples
- Provide instruction in all modalities (kinesthetic, visual, tactile, auditory, and gustatory)
- Provide adequate time for processing (up to 45 seconds)
- Provide written directions for homework and encourage parental involvement
- Consider the dos and don'ts that appear to be common sense and spell them out
- In group activities, assign the student to be the timekeeper, scorekeeper, etc. and briefly explain how to be one (with a focus

on the social behavior needed)

3. Translate the Abstract into Concrete. For example:

- Provide direct instruction on the "hidden curriculum". Examples of "hidden curriculum" items include:
 - Each teacher will have different rules. It is important to know the rules for each teacher
 - It's okay to make a mistake-use white out or an eraser
 - Raise your hand when the teacher pauses, instead of while he or she is talking
 - Do not draw violent scenes in school (Smith Myles, Trautman, & Shelvan 2004)
- Break an abstract concept into sequential, written steps
- Briefly explain why a joke is funny
- Briefly explain an exception to a rule (e.g., "Usually you take a test after you have learned a new concept, but today you will take a test to show me what you already know about the concept before I teach you more about it)
- Define and cue the student to use social behavior (e.g., when you see someone for the first time each day, say hello." . . .then show the student a card with the word 'hello' written on it as he enters your class to cue him to say hello to you)

4. Prompt to Use Coping Strategies to Ward Off Overwhelming Anxiety. For example:

- Create a "home base" (e.g., a place to go to re-compose oneself)
- Provide breaks between tasks in a quiet, out of the way place (e.g., provide time on the computer, time listening to music on ear phones)
- Give specific ways to de-stress (e.g., count to three, take three deep breaths, tense and release muscles)

5. Prepare for Change. For example:

- Use a visual daily schedule (e.g., provide a written schedule of the activities with time periods)
- Post a month-at-a-glance schedule
- Give visual advance warnings of change
- Write social stories explaining what will happen and what the student will try to do in the situation (e.g., I can walk with a buddy to the assembly, I will try to sit quietly while the presenter speaks, I can walk with a buddy back to class)

6. Offer Structure. For example:

- Provide enough space to avoid personal space issues
- Clearly define areas in the classroom
- Organize materials (e.g., color code materials, use one notebook with labeled sections, use homework assignment sheet)
- Provide a visual reminder of classroom expectations
- Use a buddy system
- Use assignment notebook; assist in budgeting time for assignments

7. Provide Motivational Strategies. For example:

- Give a reason for the assignment
- Provide assignments that relate to the student's passion
- Provide contingencies for completing work

8. Regulate Sensory Experiences. For example:

- Provide deep pressure (e.g., if effective for a particular student, have the student wear a back pack in class)
- Decrease the use of florescent lights; when possible use incandescent lighting
- Turn down the volume on the intercom speaker in the class

9. Teach Behaviors Considered Essential by Teachers in Elementary and Secondary Settings. For example:

- Provide social skills training (e.g., model, allow for practice in the relevant location, give feedback and reinforcement)
- Use social scripting (e.g., review a short, written story with pictures that explains a social situation and why it is important to use a particular skill. See <http://www.thegraycenter.com> or more information).
- Teach the following skills identified in the literature as essential to success in general education settings:
 - being on time,
 - giving input or ask questions during group discussions,
 - using the teacher's name,
 - using the required format for assignments and projects,

- following class rules,
- attending to oral and written instructions,
- interacting with peers positively,
- requesting assistance,
- expressing anger appropriately,
- completing assignments on time,
- coping with mistakes appropriately,
- responding appropriately to peer pressure to follow class rules (Lavoie, cited in Bieber, 1994, Smith Myles, 2005).

Modifications and adaptations are crucial to help support students with AS keep up with the demands of the general education classroom. Although teachers will need to include supports in each of the areas described above, translating the "hidden curriculum" into concrete terms is perhaps the most effective way to assist these students. For more information on teaching students with AS, check out our library and website: <http://www.vcu.edu/ttac>.

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